JOHN CALE

Fragments Of A Brilliant Career

In the years since he was an eight-year-old viola prodigy, composing pieces for the BBC, Welsh-born John Cale has blazed his own distinctive trail along the high ground where the avant garde meets up with rock and roll.

On *Fragments Of A Rainy Season* (Rykodisc), which was recorded live in Paris, Stuttgart and Brussels during his Spring 1992 tour, the stylistic juxtapositions of Cale's post-Velvet Underground career are made cohesive through his paring down the arrangements to just voice, solo piano or guitar. The funny thing about the album, which one can be forgiven for seeing as a greatest hits package, is how loath he is to call it such.

"I didn't want it to be a summing up," he says early one afternoon from his New York apartment. "It's more like a diary of what I've been doing for the past few years."

"What you really want from a live album is to capture some of the excitement that you don't get in the studio. One of the catch-22s of the matter is that when I was doing the Island albums [back in the mid to late-70's], we'd start out by doing the basic track, I'd arrange the form of the song, get it down, send the band home, then work on the vocal. Then we'd go out on the road and play the thing for like six weeks, and it would sound totally different, it would be roaring, and you'd wind up saying, "Why the hell don't we have a record that reflects this kind of power?"

Cale had intended on making *Fragments* "a band album," with his own contributions being made through a "heavy" Midi set-up, with tons of electronic gear onstage. A swing through Italy, however, altered his plans in an unexpected, but positive way. "The promoter there couldn't get the equipment." Cale explains. "So he said, 'Please forgive me, but play it on the grand piano.' And it was such a pleasure to go back and play a real piano. I mean, there's so much variety there, that I got rid of the Midi set-up and just went with a grand piano for the rest of the tour."

Included on the album are new versions of such Cale originals as "Fear (Is A Man's Best Friend)," "Guts," and "Paris 1919," as well as distinctive readings of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" and Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel," songs he's returned to often in his career. I ask, why the fascination with those two songs in particular?

"It's all in the words. I mean, when I wrote the heavy metal version of 'Hallelujah' that was on the *June 1st, [1974]* album, I knew I had a great riff there, but I also knew that wasn't going to mean a damn thing unless the words meant something. So I ran off — I didn't know all the words — got the lyrics, and every verse had its own thing about it, its own strength. I actually had to put the song together myself, because I couldn't sing some of the verses that Leonard was comfortable with. I mean, that song has very personally religious connotations for him and it didn't for me. Fortunately Ratso, Larry Sloman, told me, 'Just get all the verses, because the guy writes umpteen verses that he hardly ever uses.' So I got to choose the ones that were easy for me to sing."

His own lyric writing, he says, is driven by anger and the melancholy that often accompanies it. He's thoughtful when discussing the stylistic shifts in his career (ranging from pure pop to his inventing grunge), carefully weighing whether these twists and turns were the result of his suddenly hearing things differently or more a matter of conscious exploration.

"It's kind of getting lost," he says after a silence that seems to go on forever. "It's like trying to find somewhere that you haven't been before. Each of [my] albums was sort of meant to be different from the others and meant to show a different side. I mean, you can play on the confusion of an audience or you can play on the clarity of an audience. It's your bottom-line assumption about what you're dealing with. I don't like to deal from a position of saying, 'Well, nobody will ever get it' or 'No one understands this.' I don't like to underestimate the intelligence of an audience."

The originator of many of the sensibilities that are now considered the foundation of modern rock, Cale says it is gratifying to see things like the industrial scene happen in his wake, but adds that he's always rooting for other artists to take music further than it's been taken in the past.

"There's always, 'Why don't you take it further?' I mean, that's where the ideas come from. You know, you get a glimmer out of something somebody does and think, 'Hey, why don't we take that and go?'So, I think, that's what I like to notice in all of the new records that come out in that style: I know what their bottom-line is, but 'can you take it even further than that?' There's always possibilities of that."

Next up for Cale is a film and orchestral interpretation of the Orpheus myth called *Life Under Water*. As the project was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, I ask if Cale is happy that there will be a change is presidential administrations, and wonder if he thinks the NEA will be less besieged during the next four years

"Well, it's always been a lot of fun," he says, reveling for a moment in a kind of wiseguy's regret. "I mean, I like it when people throw down the gauntlet. It has strange by-products in that the revulsion of everybody at the idea that Jesse Helms can tell them what to do has spread from the less successful artists, the performance artists and so forth, to the absolutely successful artists who sell paintings in major art galleries all over the world. Suddenly they're all saying to themselves, 'Well, maybe I didn't do something controversial enough, and now I have to do something to show these people in Washington that I can do that to... ' It's weird. You'd think that successful artists could afford to be immune to all of that, but it's really annoyed a lot of people, and I think, whether there's a new administration or not, it was a lot of fun. I guess I thought it was a little distasteful, but I also found it amusing that they thought they could behave like that." ●

Danny McCue

COLLECTOR'S CONVENTION

Records • CD's • Audio Tapes
Video Tapes • Memorabilia

Sunday, January 24

Best Western

80 Clinton St., Hempstead, NY

9am Pre-Admission- $8.00

Admission- $4.00

(Save $1.00 with this ad)

Hours 10-5 • Door Prizes

For additional information call (201) 612-9222